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Chapter I

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

THE Mandan social organization was complex and highly integrated. There is an abundance of archeological evidence that at a very early time the population was more widely dispersed along the Missouri River. La Verendrye, the first known visitor to this tribe, reported that they were residing in six villages which were fortified with closely grouped lodges. Considering the depth of refuse of the protohistoric village sites of the Heart River region, all which have closely grouped lodges within a fortification, it is evident that the Mandan village groups had lived in intimate contacts with each other for two or more centuries.

Each village was an economic unit. It acted as a unit when leaving on the summer buffalo hunt, although there was a certain amount of co-operation among villages in the matter of protecting the old people left behind and in keeping enemy raiding parties from burning the lodges during their absence. Each village had its garden section which was separate from other village garden areas, although my informants claimed that at one time just preceding the first smallpox epidemic, when the Boley, Scattered, Motsiff, and Slant villages of the west side and Round Lodges and Yellow Earth villages of the east side were occupied, all the available corn grounds were planted and that it was necessary for the villages to meet in council to define the garden limits of each village. At that time the most distant villages of the Heart River region were only a few miles from each other, and some families had gardens on opposite sides of the river. A village was frequently abandoned by a part of the people whenever wood was depleted or the corn ground was no longer productive, which in large measure accounts for the presence of so many village sites showing short occupation. At the mouth of the Heart River where the wooded bottoms were most extensive, the villages show longest continuous occupation.

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554 796 626 leader.[6] Even the most distinguished war leader, who was one of the two head chiefs of the village, frequently joined an expedition under another for the purpose of capturing horses, although in this instance recognition was often shown an outstanding leader by naming him a co-leader.

622 An essential function of a chief was to mold public opinion so that a village could act in unison. A chief was considered eminent if for a long time under his leadership there had been a minimum of dissension in the village. Mandan informants still speak of Good Boy, who was chief of Slant Village below the Heart River after the first smallpox epidemic. He was able to unite the remnants of several villages into a single village and to co-ordinate elements with a minimum of friction. He was essentially a village leader who devoted himself, according to tradition, to the rebuilding of the tribe to its former prominence. It is significant to note that, a few years after his death, one group of Mandan separated from the parent-village and were not reunited until Good Boy's son, Four Bears, was elevated to second chief.

622 182 778 A chief could prevent intervillage or intravillage warfare only to the extent to which he could inculcate a concept of tribal unity. Neither a chief nor the council has authority to prevent a portion of a village from separating and establishing a separate village. Such separations as have occurred have usually been of short duration, largely because of the integration of the ceremonial structure through the entire tribal population. Although each permanent Mandan village was in a large measure a separate economic, social, and ceremonial unit, the villages were not entirely independent. The turtle drums, which were considered the most sacred objects of the tribe, were held within the Nuptadi band of east-side Mandan, and the other villages were obliged to borrow them for ceremonial purposes. Whereas the sacred cedar in the center of each village was a symbol of village unity, the Mandan considered the turtle drums a symbol of tribal unity.

6. Cf. chap. vii, "Eagle-trapping."